Racial Justice Through a Reconstructionist Lens

Text used or cited in this discussion

Modah Ani

Modeh ani lefanekha ruakh hai
vekayam shehekhezarta bi nishmati
bekhemlah Rabbah emunatekha.

מוֹדֶה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיָּם, שֶׁהֶחֱזַרְתָּ
בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחֶמְלָה , רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתֶךָ

Prayer for Healing: "When the World is Sick"

"When the world is sick, can't no one be well
But I dreamt we were all beautiful and strong..."

Mi shebeirakh avoteinu Avraham, Yitzkhak v'Ya'akov
Mi shebeirakh imoteinu Sara, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah,
Hu y'varekh v'yirapeh et kol ha-holim,
Hu y'varekh v'yirapeh et hakol.

May the One who blessed our ancestors, *Abraham*, *Isaac* and *Jacob*,
May the One who blessed our ancestors,
Sara, *Rebecca*, Rachel and Leah,
Bless and heal all who are sick,
Bring blessing and healing to all.

Rabbi Annie Lewis, Ritualwell.org

Reconstructing Judaism's Racial Justice Commitments

Join and lead Jewish efforts to dismantle systemic racism, and to advance racial diversity, equity and inclusion within the Reconstructionist movement. We commit to diversifying our movement at all levels, to enacting powerful and transformative allyship, and to leveraging our power and the

richness of our traditions to lead the fight for racial justice in partnership with other values-aligned organizations. While acknowledging the intersectionality of different axes of exclusion and recognizing the continued need to sustain our historic commitments and to seize opportunities to support and institutionalize a culture of inclusion across our movement, particularly with regard to disability inclusion, this plan focuses significantly on race in response to the urgency of this time.

A. Strive to become an anti-racist organization.
B. Engage and support our congregations and communities in the work of transformational change.
C. Elevate the voices and experiences of BIPOC in our texts and tradition.
D. Advance an anti-racist agenda in the public sphere.

Pirkei Avot 2:16

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it; If you have studied much Torah, you shall be given much reward. Faithful is your employer to pay you the reward of your labor; And know that the grant of reward unto the righteous is in the age to come.

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה
לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה.
אִם לָמַדְתָּ תוֹרָה הַרְבֵּה, נוֹתְנִים לְךָ שָׂכָר
הַרְבֵּה. וְנֶאֱמָן הוּא בַעַל מְלַאכְתְּךָ
שֶׁיְּשַׁלֵּם לְךָ שְׂכַר פְּעֻלָּתֶךָ. וְדַע מַתַּן
שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים לֶעָתִיד לָבֹא:

13th Amendment: Abolition of Slavery

Passed by Congress January 31, 1865. The 13th Amendment changed a portion of Article IV, Section 2.

Section 1
Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2
Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Further Readings

Book Recommendations

- *Nice Racism* by Robin D'Angelo
- *Caste* by Isabelle Wilkerson
- *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee

Webpages

- Reconstructing Judaism's Strategic Plan
- Reconstructing Judaism Commitments to Racial Justice
- Jewish Racial Justice Framework

Evolve: Groundbreaking Jewish Conversation Articles

- "Grounded in Gratitude, Tackling Systematic Racism with Open Hearts" by Rabbi Sandra Lawson
- "The Torah Case for Reparations: A Jewish View" by Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein
- "What Happens When Everything Is Broken? Grappling with #DefundthePolice" by Rabbi Aryeh Cohen
- "Noticing Jews of Color in Our Communities" by Carmen Amalia Corrales
- "Radical Inclusion" by Aurora Levins Morales
- "One Synagogue's Experience With a Racial Justice Discussion Group" by Jayme Epstein & Fran Zamore
- "Thoughts on Racism and Antisemitism" by Rabbi Modechai Liebling
- "Jews and White Privilege" by Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg & Rabbi Mackenzie (Max) Zev Reynolds
- "Preparing Our Communities for Conversations on Race" by Rabbi Joshua Lesser
- "Racism in the Jewish Community" by Rabbi Sandra Lawson

Speakers Bios

Rabbi Sandra Lawson, Director of Racial Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Reconstructing Judaism

Rabbi Sandra Lawson (she/her) works with senior staff, lay leaders, clergy, rabbinical students, and Reconstructionist communities to help Reconstructing Judaism realize its deeply held aspiration of becoming an anti-racist organization and movement. In her role, Lawson is developing a series of anti-racist policies and trainings for the organization and its affiliate members. She also serves as a mentor to rabbinical students.

The 2018 Reconstructionist Rabbinical College graduate is one of the first African American, queer, female rabbis. The thought-leader has consciously sought to alter the perception of what a rabbi — and the rabbinate — looks like. Lawson is known for tackling difficult questions surrounding Jews and race in podcasts, essays, media appearances and speeches. A social media pioneer, Lawson models what it means to teach Torah in digital spaces. She has built a following of more than 50,000 people on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. In 2020, the Forward named Lawson to its "Forward 50" proclaiming her a "truth teller".

Prior to joining Reconstructing Judaism, Lawson served as the Associate Chaplain for Jewish Life and the Senior Jewish Educator at Hillel at Elon University in North Carolina. She is also the founder of Kol Hapanim – All Faces – an inclusive, Jewish community that is relevant, accessible, and rooted in tradition, where all who come are welcomed and diversity is embraced.

Lawson was born in St. Louis, Mo. and grew up in a military family. She graduated from Florida's Saint Leo University magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology. She also holds a Master of Arts degree in sociology from Clark Atlanta University.

Lawson served in the U.S. Army as a Military Police person with a specialty in Military Police investigations. She specialized in cases involving child abuse and domestic violence. Upon leaving the military, she started a personal training business and later worked as an adjunct instructor of sociology at local community colleges. She has also served as the investigative researcher for the Anti-Defamation League's Southeast Region, becoming the go-to person when law enforcement in the South needed information on hate groups.

Lawson lives in North Carolina with her wife Susan and three "fur babies": Izzy, Bridget and Simon.

Rabbi Micah Geurin Weiss, Assistant Director of Thriving Communities/Tikkun Olam Specialist at Reconstructing Judaism

Rabbi Micah Weiss received smicha from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and began working for the Thriving Communities department in 2019. He is delighted to begin his rabbinic career in a position of service to Reconstructionist communities, with a particular focus on increasing our dedication to the sacred work of tikkun olam.

Micah was born and raised in Atlanta, Ga. where he grew up Reconstructionist at Congregation Bet Haverim. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies and African American Studies from Wesleyan University and was a fellow at Yeshivat Hadar for two years.

During his time as a student at RRC, Micah served as the student rabbi at Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Congregation Kol Ami and Drexel Hillel. He also completed a unit of CPE at Lankenau Medical Center, worked for Kol Tzedek, and designed the social justice beit midrash curriculum for Repair the World.

Prior to beginning rabbinical school, Micah worked as a community organizer at the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center and as the volunteer director of Project Hayei Sarah. Micah also worked as a Jewish teen educator at J Teen Leadership and Etgar 36 and taught Jewish text classes at Hofstra University Hillel. He is an alum of Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps and American Jewish World Service Volunteer Summer program.

Micah loves teaching Torah and singing niggunim any chance he gets. He is currently training to become a spiritual director with the Bekhol Derakhekha Da'ehu program at RRC. Micah is married to Nomi Teutsch, and they have two children, Eyal Or and Nadav Lev. Outside of work, Micah and Nomi are also co-creating a home-based Jewish communal space with their friends and community, the West Philly Shtiebel.